



# EIGHT BATTLE-TESTED SURVIVAL TACTICS

for the New, Entry-Level  
DoD Program Manager

*Brian E. Schultz*

“It takes about 10 years to [develop] a good fighter pilot, and the same is true for a good acquisition professional.”

—**Gen. Lawrence Skantze, former commander  
of Air Force Systems Command, USAF (retired)**

**H**elping our new and junior program managers (PMs) learn their profession is not an easy task. One tool that helped this author was the advice and stories from senior PM mentors. Their insights assisted me in the current day-to-day challenges and also helped me realize that a PM career can be a very rewarding and fulfilling endeavor.

Although the following is a hypothetical mentoring session for a new PM, it is based on my actual experiences. My objective is to generate greater interest in mentoring and sharing appropriate stories for those new to the PM career field. The focus of this article is on PM soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. Please note the position title of “Integrated Product Team (IPT) lead” is used interchangeably with junior PM in this article.

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>AUG 2011</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Eight Battle-Tested Survival Tactics for the New, Entry-Level DoD Program Manager</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Defense Acquisition University, Defense AT&amp;L, 9820 Belvoir Road, Fort Belvoir, VA, 22060-5565</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>5</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

So you're our new PM? Let's discuss some PM survival tactics that I've learned during the course of my career.

## **1 Keep your promises!**

*"He loses his thanks who promises and delays."*

—Proverb

Years ago, I worked on a major communications program. The program had a long history of schedule slips because of technical problems discovered during developmental testing. The contractor would propose new dates that our PM accepted without fully understanding the risks. We were making good progress but continued to slip major milestone dates due to overly optimistic schedules. It got to the point where the new program executive officer (PEO) told our program office that we had a credibility problem, and we were going to fix it.

Our program office PM did not last long, and our new one eventually turned things around by making sure we delivered what and when we promised. Any proposed schedule was scrubbed in great detail. The new PM did not sign up to the new schedule until we had key risks and appropriate mitigation strategies in place. We established stretch goals to challenge and reward the team for early completion dates. The contractor also brought in a new PM, and everyone understood that we were serious about meeting promised contractual milestones and schedule dates. We eventually regained our credibility by meeting interim milestones and delivering the system in accordance with the new schedule. It wasn't easy, and it took a lot of hard work and diligence.

As a junior PM or IPT lead, you have an important role. The system PM is counting on you to meet your commitments in support of the larger program or portfolio of programs. If you are asked to support a milestone or provide a deliverable by a certain date, make sure you meet it. If you can't, don't wait until the last minute to spring the bad news. Seek help by elevating issues that can't be resolved at your level. Asking for help when you hit a roadblock is not a sign of weakness, but be sure you have done everything at your level to resolve the issue before elevating it.

PMs are responsible for meeting their program commitments. Be careful about what you sign up to; but once you have, make it happen!

## **2 Know your customer and your product.**

*"There is only one boss. The customer. And he can fire everybody in the company from the chairman on down, simply by spending his money somewhere else."*

—Sam Walton

Acquisition managers typically think of the customer as the warfighter or the user of the system. While PMs should clearly understand the warfighter requirements and be technically

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smart on their system and its technology, there are other customers to consider.

I'll never forget an orientation briefing I attended with a PEO and a senior PM I worked for. Part of the discussion was about the customer and went something like this:

PEO: So who is your customer?

PM: Air Combat Command.

PEO: What do you provide them?

PM: We provide them with the system, training, and logistics support.

PEO: I thought the company develops the system. The program office does not bend metal or lay cable. What do you actually provide them?

PM: Well, we provide the overall program management and have responsibility for the system before it's accepted by the user. We develop the Request for Proposal (RFP) and the contract documents.

PEO: OK, so your product is this document, and your customer for that document is the company or companies that respond to it?

PM: Yes, sir.

PEO: Excellent.

We need to understand the significance of this customer relationship. Yes, the user is the ultimate customer of the system but your day-to-day customer is actually the contractor and other acquisition stakeholders. We need to pay close attention to what we produce and in your case, its acquisition strategies,

RFPs and contracts. If you don't develop and execute these products effectively, do you expect to have good outcomes?

PMs need to focus on the key products they produce which lay the foundation for their program. These products are acquisition strategies and plans, program baselines, and contractual documents. PMs also need to know the customer of these products.

### **3 Stay focused on program priorities.** *"Focus on remedies, not faults."* —Jack Nicklaus

PMs must carefully choose what they and their team will focus on. It is not unusual for a PM to tell their team that some of the tasks at hand will have to wait for another day while they address priority issues. This sounds easy, but it's not always the case, as the following story suggests.

A junior PM in my organization encountered an issue with a contractor who was having some export issues on a small but very important fixed-price commercial contract for a foreign military sales customer. The contractor was uncooperative in sharing information on its get-well plans and suggested that the U.S. government may need to provide some cost and schedule "relief" in a contract modification. Our PM was focused on other, lower-priority issues in his portfolio of programs. He told me there was nothing we could do other than wait and see what would happen, since our contracting officer did not support a contract change. I did not accept this wait-and-see approach and suggested we reassess the resolution plan.

After some brainstorming with our contracts and legal staffs, we advised the contractor that we had decided to initiate a contractor performance assessment report (CPAR) on this contract. This was unusual, since a CPAR was only optional, because of the small contract value and the contract was well underway.

CPARs get contractor attention since the report goes into a database used to assess contractor past performance in competitive source selections. To be fair, this particular CPAR only covered the period of the contract left to be performed; but this period would include the delivery and test of the system. It did not take long before we saw a different approach from this company. Our previous issue was resolved quickly and there was no impact to the schedule. The system was delivered on time and worked flawlessly. It was a great pleasure to inform this company that we submitted a great CPAR for their performance on this contract.

PMs have many tools available to address program risks, issues, and problems. You may have heard the saying "Hope is not a method." PMs are not hired to hope or to wait and see what happens. Their job is to take actions that will bring about successful outcomes.

### **4 Set a high standard.** *"Whatever you are, be a good one."* —President Abraham Lincoln

Several years ago, I worked as an industry PM on a defense contract with a major subcontractor. Our prime-sub team insisted on high-quality work and we designed internal processes to enforce the standards. For one particular deliverable, we asked the subcontractor to prepare a detailed report that was due to the customer the next day. Even though it would be late, I asked for a revision of this report to clarify some critical items. The subcontractor PM took some pride in authorship and was concerned that the report was revised significantly. When confronted with the concern, I apologized for not providing feedback earlier that we were re-working the deliverable. I also stated that the report did not adequately address one of the key program issues. This issue was important enough to warrant a slip of a few days in the delivery. Later, the subcontractor PM thanked me for insisting on the rework as this deliverable proved to be crucial in rapidly resolving several program issues.

PMs have many demands in their daily schedule. There are many requests for information and regular reporting on program status, issues, etc. The temptation to be satisfied with something that is not high-quality will arise. It can be easy to rationalize that this product is "good enough."

Don't fall into this trap. If you are not given enough time to deliver a high-quality product, let your boss know that. You may get additional time or help and, if nothing else, you'll be managing expectations. Set the expectation with your team that only top-quality products will be accepted. I clearly remember the feedback I received from a Program Office Director when I had submitted a paper of poor quality. His comment was: "If you can't be trusted with this little task, how can I trust you with something big?"

### **5 Accept new challenges with the right mindset.** *"When you've got something to prove, there's nothing greater than a challenge."* —Terry Bradshaw

A few years ago, our organization learned we would be inspected as part of a base-wide Unit Compliance Inspection (UCI). The UCI is conducted by an inspector general (IG) organization that assesses an organization's compliance with required mandates for managing acquisition programs. This inspection was a concern because several of us had not experienced one before, and we had doubts about how well we would do.

Our PM recognized that the team was not approaching the inspection properly. He changed our mindset by getting the team to recognize that the inspection was a great opportunity to showcase how good we were. It was also an opportunity to share some of our best practices in which we had invested a lot

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of time and effort. We knew we were doing all the right things, but we needed to gather the evidence to show the UCI team. The inspection came and the IG rated us as an outstanding team; one of only two in the entire acquisition wing!

Challenges are often great opportunities to learn and excel. PMs should expect and seek out new challenges. This includes seeking career broadening type jobs and taking on additional responsibility when offered the chance. It also means stepping up and getting the tough jobs completed, even when it might appear to be very difficult.

**6 Build trust and communicate with your stakeholders.**  
*“The glue that holds all relationships together—including the relationship between the leader and the led is trust, and trust is based on integrity.”*  
—Brian Tracy

The lack of effective communication is often cited as one of the major issues in acquisition. Communications flow and mechanisms should be defined so the team and stakeholders understand what the expectations are. While good communication is important to keep the IPT on track, it is also one of the primary tools you can use to build trust. We have learned and re-learned that establishing good communication does not just happen, but takes planning, implementation, and follow-up.

Here’s an example of how difficult it is when you don’t have trust and good communications. A few years back, I inherited a

really bad situation on a Foreign Military Sales (FMS) program for a Middle Eastern country. The FMS customer needed some important upgrades for their fleet but was reluctant to start the FMS process. We did not understand why. Despite repeated attempts to discuss this with them, we did not get a response.

After talking to several people familiar with the previous program, I learned that this customer believed my predecessors had insulted them and were insensitive to the host nation culture. Communications were one-sided (our team providing information) and detailed discussions were not conducted. When a technical anomaly was discovered in their software, the customer had no faith that the proposed fix would resolve the problem and even questioned its utility after successful testing. It then became clear as to why this FMS customer was reluctant to invest any additional money in this program: it was a lack of trust.

It took a lot of repair work but we re-established a good relationship. Our trip itineraries now included time to drink tea and talk with our counterparts before getting to work. We accepted offers to social events after work. We started educating team members about cross-cultural communications and sent staff to appropriate training before they traveled in-country. Finally, we took extra time to explain the program details and ensured that concerns were fully addressed. Trust was re-established and the country moved forward with the badly needed fleet upgrades.

Trust is a key aspect in building relationships. A senior industry manager once told me, “If we have the right relationship with our customer, we can accomplish anything!”

**7 Develop and maintain teamwork.**  
*“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”*

—Henry Ford

I remember when I was the supervisor of a junior PM who led a team that was developing an airborne command and control mission system upgrade. I received feedback from the PM and his industry counterpart that the program team was struggling. The engineers were debating technical issues and the team’s progress was very slow. I attended one of their meetings as an observer and confirmed that we had a major problem. Two individuals could not agree on even minor issues and both were in technical leadership roles. It came to a head when a senior company official complained to our agency senior leadership, accusing my team of holding up progress on the program.

In an attempt to foster teamwork, we decided to conduct a Working Together Team (WTT) session. The purpose of the WTT was to build trust and foster a better working relationship with the players. The WTT was conducted over a 2-day period, and the team was brutally honest in speaking about their concerns. As a result, both parties gained a new appreciation for what the other was feeling. We developed and received buy-in

for a communications and issue resolution plan. In hindsight, this two-day team-building session was one of the turning points in getting the program back on track.

PMs must ensure that the team is working together as a cohesive unit and that everyone is accountable for their role in the program. Once the team is performing, continue to monitor the interactions and ensure that new players understand the expectations.

## **8** Develop your skills and get training/education.

*"I think everyone should go to college and get a degree and then spend 6 months as a bartender and 6 months as a cabdriver. Then they would really be educated."*

—Al McGuire

Acquisition, program management, and leadership training are essential for the new PM. A typical college education does not equip the new PM for this profession, and there is no entry-level resident technical school.

While the training courses are necessary, program management is learned by doing. Get involved in activities that you have not experienced before. Ask to sit in as a strap-hanger to observe a particular process or event and observe senior acquisition professionals in action.

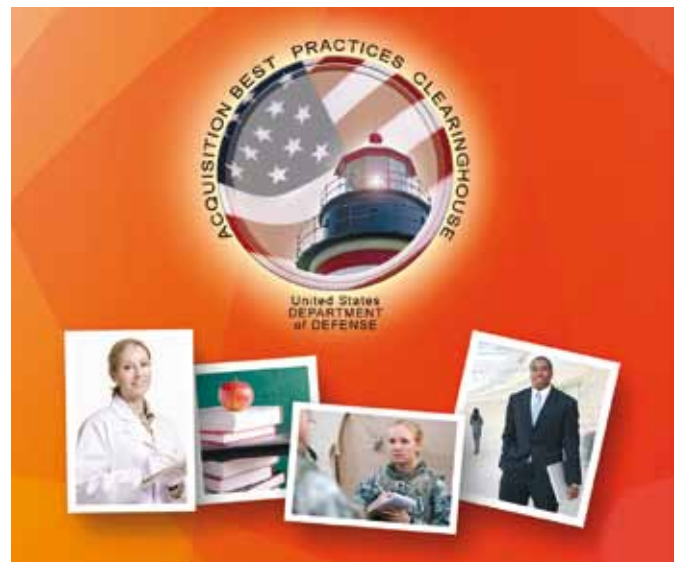
When I was in my first junior PM job as a young 2nd lieutenant, I volunteered to brief a visiting senior leader on my program. Our office scheduled dry-runs and I worked very hard to prepare. When the time came for me to brief the leader, I thought I was ready. Unfortunately, the briefing was right after lunch, and the room was dark and very warm. I had practiced keeping good eye contact, but that did not help since the visiting official was sound asleep. My boss gave me the cue to keep going, which I did. The senior leader awoke in time to ask me a question and compliment me on a great briefing. I learned early on as a junior PM to expect the unexpected and to try to avoid certain events right after a big meal!

Your career development plan is crucial for your long-term growth. While you need to take care of mission accomplishment in your current job, think about your developmental goals and have a plan to get there.

## **Closing Thoughts**

There are many lessons to be learned in acquisition program management. Many will be learned by trial and error as you gain experience. There is no simple checklist to address the complex issues you will face, but good judgment will be your friend. Fortunately, you will have many experts to assist you. Enjoy your PM journey, and don't forget to help others who follow you. Challenge your team to achieve great things, and then have fun getting after it!

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## **DoD Acquisition Best Practices Clearinghouse (BPCh)**

A single, authoritative source of useful, validated, actionable practice information

### **Do these issues sound familiar?**

- There are many practice lists to choose from but no guidance for selecting specific practices
- "Proof of practice" effectiveness is usually not available
- The connection between practices and specific program risks are undefined
- Success factors for practices are not well documented
- Implementation guidance is often missing
- The cost and timeliness associated with implementing and using the practices are often not specified

### **The BPCh can help by:**

- Serving as the authoritative source for practices in DoD and industry
- Targeting the needs of the software acquisition, software development, systems engineering, program management, and logistics communities
- Connecting communities of practice, centers of excellence, academic and industry sources and practitioners
- Promoting and assisting in the selection, adoption, and effective utilization of best practices and supporting evidence

For more information, visit the BPCh web site at <https://bpch.dau.mil>, or contact:

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